

When your English is too good

4 Comments

3

7,363 views

By Ingrid Piller | November 19, 2009 | Language, migration & social justice, Recent Posts

Some people just can't win it seems. Second language speakers are in that category. I can't even begin to count how many people who have read a fraction of the English literature I have read and who have never written much in English take the liberty to comment on my English. They usually congratulate me on how good it is ... That's what you call a left-handed compliment I suppose – I doubt that anyone goes around congratulating Maths professors that they've mastered arithmetic and can handle two-digit figures with such ease.

Many native speakers take it upon themselves to judge the English of people who don't speak their brand of English. In the case of migrants to Australia this is most often to point out some deficiency: the judgment that someone's English isn't good enough has become a key facet of social exclusion and the judgment is used to keep migrants out of jobs or keep them in jobs below their qualifications. In fact, migrants, and particularly refugees, have become so firmly associated with "poor English" in the public imagination that having good English is now being used in the media to judge whether a refugee is "genuine" or not. I'm talking about the spokesman for [the asylum seekers who were stuck on the Oceanic Viking](#) until a few days ago. Both the fact that he is using an English name (Alex) instead of his "real" name and the fact that he is "well-spoken" and speaks "English with an American accent" have been held against him and have been used to discredit him. [This is from an ABC interview:](#)

MARK COLVIN: And the High Commissioner also said, I'll quote "Alex's accent is quite a distinct American accent. It is not the accent of a Sri Lankan Tamil".

ALEX: Does the Sri Lankan High Commissioner feel that people in Sri Lanka don't have American accents or British accents? Is there not international schools in Sri Lanka? Is there not people that do accent training for call centres and various other customer care services?

MARK COLVIN: So you trained in a call centre?

ALEX: Pardon me? I was trained in a call centre for an American call centre.

[Alex himself has apparently been as surprised](#) as I am that his high level of English proficiency could come to discredit his claim to refugee status:

[Alex] has expressed surprise over the fact that how his American accent English could become a reason for the rejection of his refugee plea. "Just because I speak English, a~d I

was educated in an American boys mission school in my home town, and then I finished my BA, and then I finished my MBA in India, so does that mean I am not a refugee? "We are facing genocide in Sri Lanka — it's not about whether you are educated or not educated. Just the fact that you are Tamil, [...]"

A true Catch 22 story: call center operators all over the world as well as many migrants to Australia have to change their names to make it in an English-speaking world; similarly, they have to adjust their accents so that they sound less "foreign" to their far-away call-center customers or close-by employers.

Around the world learning English comes with the promise of social advancement and inclusion in the mythical "West" – just to be told "Oops, overshot the mark, you're too good to be genuine."



Next Post
Negative and positive wri

Author

Ingrid Piller

Dr Ingrid Piller, FAHA, is Professor of Applied Linguistics at Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia. Her research interests include intercultural communication, bilingual education and the sociolinguistics of language learning and teaching.